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Air Attack on Missile Sites Was Seriously Weighed

By MAX FRANKEL

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 29—President Kennedy and his advisers gave long and serious thought to ordering a surprise air attack on Soviet missile bases in Cuba before deciding that a limited blockade could achieve their objectives.

Administration officials, looking back today on the fateful choice, recalled that the final decision was made for moral as well as tactical reasons. Grave questions were raised in the President's inner circle about the blot that an assault on Cuba would place on the United States record and the repercussions it would have around the world.

The discovery of Soviet missile installations two weeks ago led to the immediate study of various responses — from doing nothing to protests to the United Nations and the Organization of American States, blockade, surprise air strike and invasion.

Invasion Ruled Out

Inaction was quickly rejected as intolerable and humiliating. Invasion was soon recognized as an excessive response — the immediate objective was elimination of Soviet bases, not of the Castro Government.

Protests for action by international organizations, the President and his staff agreed, would be ineffective. So the choice narrowed to blockade or air attack.

Before the 10 or 12 men making the decision was an estimate that the mobile medium-range missile sites were appearing almost daily, with some assumed to be already operational. The first of the longer-range intermediate missile installations found to be under construction was expected to

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APPOINTED BY PRESIDENT: Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, left, and Roswell L. Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense. They were named to committee coordinating the handling of the Cuban situation.

ATTACK ON BASES WAS CONSIDERED

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be completed Nov. 1; the second Nov. 15 and a third Dec. 1.

The proposal to bomb the Soviet installations raised a number of tactical questions. Officials thought it probably would have involved killing some of the Russian officers and technicians who controlled the bases. This, in turn, would have greatly raised the chances of violent Soviet counter-action, they believed.

What is more, the planners here developed what they came to call the "bounce-back" theory. This assumed a surprise Soviet attack in Berlin or against some other allied base in a strategically weak position and an immediate clamor around the world for both sides to cease all military action.

In such a situation, the feeling was that the United States would have been faced with a choice of all-out nuclear war or an immediate truce that would have left the bases in Cuba damaged but not removed.

Ethical Factor Dominant

But overriding these concerns, officials report, was the general feeling that a surprise attack would be contrary to the country's tradition, history and aspiration, that it would be a response not commensurate with the provocation and that it would permanently damage the President's ability to promote responsible conduct in international relations.

As the President's speech a week ago made plain, he desired to retain his freedom of action throughout the power confrontation with the Soviet Union and, as last week's events demonstrated, he used the threat of further action effectively.

But the consensus among his most trusted associates was that the selective blockade, vigorous diplomatic activity and an impressive military build-up would force the Russians back.

Although the combination of these moves spread the impression toward the end of last week that an air strike or invasion

had decided to fire on the reconnaissance planes brought the situation to its most dangerous point.

A U-2 of the Strategic Air Command was missed Saturday and presumed lost over Cuba. Another reconnaissance aircraft drew Cuban anti-aircraft fire. On the chance that Premier Castro was taking independent action, Mr. Kennedy arranged to leave time for the Russians to call a halt on these attacks.

Air Surveillance Kept Up

There was no intention here of ending the surveillance. In fact, to obtain clear close-up photographs of the Soviet sites for diplomatic and propaganda purposes, American planes flew over the installations repeatedly and at extremely low altitudes.

Fearing an "escalation" of the situation, the Defense Department warned that the reconnaissance planes would be protected. It also used the occasion to announce the call-up of more than 14,000 air reservists.

Had the firing continued, the intention was to strike back at the anti-aircraft emplacements, though not all the long-range missile ~~and~~ ~~most~~ of the anti-aircraft weapons were in Cuban hands, although Cubans are only beginning to learn from Russian crews the operation of SA-2 batteries, a Nike-like anti-aircraft missile that is the most elaborate defensive weapon on

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